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(54) Abstract Title
Electrolytic reduction of sintered mass of metal oxide

(57) A method of electrolytic reduction of a metal oxide, in particular titanium dioxide, wherein said electrolysis is performed on a sintered mass of a mixture of metal oxide substantially comprising particles of size greater than 20 microns and finer particles of less than 7 microns. The sintered mass is preferably formed by mixing binder and water. The finer particles may make up 5 - 70% by weight of the mass.

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Improved Feedstock for Electrolytic Reduction of Metal Oxide.

PCT Patent Application WO99/64638 describes a method of removal of oxygen from metal oxides and solid solutions by electrolysis in a fused salt, and has particular application to titanium dioxide reduction.

The possibility of producing inexpensive Ti and Ti alloy powders is of tremendous economic importance. Several attempts have been made using the process described above with varying degrees of success. A problem with this process is that to get reduction of the oxide electrical contact must be maintained for some time at a temperature at which oxygen diffuses readily. Under these conditions the titanium will diffusion bond to itself resulting in clumps of material stuck together rather than free flowing powder.

It is an object of the invention to overcome this problem by providing a feedstock for the process which overcomes these problems.

The invention comprises a method of electrolytic reduction of a metal oxide wherein said electrolysis is performed on a sintered mass of a mixture of metal oxide substantially comprising particles of size generally greater than 20 microns and finer particles of less than 7 microns.

Preferably the finer particles make up between 10 and 55% of the sintered block by weight.

High density granules of approximately the size required for the powder are manufactured and then are mixed with very fine unsintered titanium dioxide, binder and water in the appropriate ratios and formed into the required shape of feedstock. This feedstock is then sintered at to achieve the required strength for the reduction process. The resulting feedstock after sintering but before reduction consists of high density granules in a low density (porous) matrix.

The feedstock can be reduced as blocks using the usual method and the result is a friable block which can easily be broken up into powder. The reason for this is that the matrix shrinks considerably during the reduction resulting in a sponge-like structure, but the granules shrink to

nitrogen analysis indicated that the levels of these interstitials were 800 ppm and 5 ppm respectively. The form of the product was very similar to that of the feedstock except the colour change and slight shrinkage. Due to the process used to manufacture the feedstock the product was friable and could be crushed up using fingers and pliers to a reasonably fine powder. Some of the particles were large therefore the material was passed through a 250 μm sieve. Approximately 65% by weight of the material was small enough to pass through the 250 μm sieve after using this simple crushing technique.

The resulting powder was washed in hot water to remove the salt and very fine particles, then it was washed in glacial acetic acid to remove the CaO and then finally in water again to remove the acid. The powder was then dried in a drying oven overnight at 70 °C.

The results can be expressed as the concentration of calciner discharge required to achieve useable strength of the feedstock after sintering. At 1300°C about 10% was required, at 1200°C about 25% was required and at 1000°C at least 50% was required although this still gave a very weak feedstock.

The calciner discharge used can be replaced by cheaper amorphous TiO_2 . The key requirement for this 'matrix' material is that it sinters easily with significant shrinkage during the sintering process. Any oxide or mixture of oxides which fulfil these criteria would be usable. For TiO_2 this means the particle size must be less than about 1 μm . It is estimated that at least 5% matrix material should be present in order to give any significant strength to the sintered product.

The starting granules need not be rutile sand but could be manufactured by a sintering and crushing process, and in principle there is no reason to suppose that alloy powders could not be made by this route. Other metal powders could also presumably be made by this route.

Claims

1. A method of electrolytic reduction of a metal oxide wherein said electrolysis is performed on a sintered mass of a mixture of metal oxide substantially comprising particles of size greater than 20 microns and finer particles of less than 7 microns.
2. A method of electrolytic reduction of metal oxide as claimed in claim 1 wherein said sintered mass is additionally formed by mixing binder and water.
3. A method as claimed in any preceding claim wherein said metal oxide is titanium oxide.
4. A method as claimed in any preceding claim wherein said finer particles make up between 5 and 70% of the sintered block by weight.
5. A method as claimed in any preceding claim wherein said finer particles make up between 10 and 55% of the sintered block by weight.
6. A feedstock for the electrolytic reduction of metal oxide, said feedstock comprising a sintered mass of a mixture of metal oxide particles of size greater than 20 microns and finer particles of less than 7 microns.
7. A feedstock as claimed in claim 6 wherein said metal oxide is titanium oxide.
8. A feedstock as claimed in claim 7 wherein said finer particles make up between 5 and 70% of the sintered block by weight.
9. A feedstock as claimed in claim 8 wherein said finer particles make up between 10 and 55% of the sintered block by weight.